

Why Not? Chuck Yeager Did It

by Lt. Robert Belk

Our squadron was in Fallon for a month-long, air-wing training detachment prior to COMPTUEX. Despite being in the squadron for 9 months, I

was still the new guy in the squadron. This status meant that I rarely got a good deal. So when I heard that I was going to be part of the crew that fired the first Hellfire missile shot in our squadron's history, I was ecstatic. It was a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity that would take place during the third week of training. I couldn't wait for it to roll around.

After the second week of training, we got our customary admin at Lake Tahoe for the weekend to relax, enjoy the surroundings, and

get prepared for the more arduous events that would come during the final phases of training. One day, I was fooling around, sparring with one of my fellow JOs in Tahoe. He administered a hefty blow to my left side. I immediately screamed, "Damn, I think you broke my rib," but, after writhing in pain and cursing for a considerable amount of time, I managed to convince myself otherwise. I decided that my ribs were simply bruised.

Two days later, I was still very stiff, but I was scheduled to fly. Even if I did have a broken rib, I was convinced that it wasn't that big a deal. If Chuck Yeager could break the sound barrier with broken ribs, why couldn't I fly a helicopter at 100 knots? Besides, there was no way I was going to pass up an opportunity to shoot a Hellfire. So went my logic, if you can call it that.

The XO and I took off for two and a half hours of practice runs at a target northeast of NAS Fallon. Everything went

smoothly, and we returned from the flight without incident. The success of this flight and my ability to fly the helicopter seemed to confirm my suspicion that I had simply suffered a bad bruise. I was confident that subsequent flights would be the same.

The next morning, we took off again to test the system with a live missile loaded on the rail. Again, I felt fit, and my side didn't bother me. We returned to NAS Fallon for a quick turnaround and launched again for the real shot in the afternoon.

About an hour into that flight, after 10 more practice runs at the target, I began to feel a dull pain in the left side of my chest. The pain quickly escalated. It felt like a vise was clamping down on me. It was hard to breathe, and I was having a hard time concentrating. I thought, "Not now—we've almost taken the shot." The pain, however, soon got to the point where I had to tell the rest of the crew.

We were recording our FLIR display and ICS communications to document the practice runs and the upcoming missile shot. I certainly didn't want my condition to be recorded for history, so I asked one of our aircrewmen to stop the tape. Then I confessed that I was having serious pains in my chest and suggested that it might be a good idea to set the helicopter down so I could stretch a bit. The XO took the controls and we orbited for a few minutes so I could loosen my harness and try to ease the tightness in my chest. After a few minutes of

lie down. After some consultation, he decided to take me to a local hospital for some better X-rays. On the drive to the hospital, I was having such severe muscle spasms that it felt like convulsions.

When we finally got to the hospital, I was subjected to more X-rays and a CAT scan. The doctors determined (surprise, surprise!) that I had a broken rib and blood in my chest. As it turned out, the broken bone had cut a capillary in my chest, and a pocket of blood was pressing against my left lung. They inserted a chest tube into my left side and admitted me to the ICU, where I received regular doses of several pain-killers (the only benefit of this experience). By the next day, over a liter of blood had drained out of my chest.

After three days of recuperation in the ICU, I was released from the hospital, walking

deep breathing and self-healing, I reported that I would be fine, and we continued the flight. About 15 minutes later, we took our missile shot and headed for home.

Once on deck, I feebly extracted myself from the cockpit and limped into the hangar, where I called the flight surgeon and asked him to pick me up. By the time he had gotten me to the clinic, I could barely sit, breathe or walk. My muscles were so tight that I couldn't even

feebly and trying to salve my ego. Although I had been in serious pain during that stay in the hospital, it could have been a lot worse. Like any typical pilot, I had thought there was nothing that would keep me from flying a once-in-a-lifetime good deal. However, once-in-a-lifetime opportunities can become last-in-a-lifetime events. I had risked my own health and the safety of my crew, with my single-minded desire to fly that flight. 🦅

Lt. Belk flies with HS-7.

